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A Response to David Fleer's Preaching in Churches of Christ

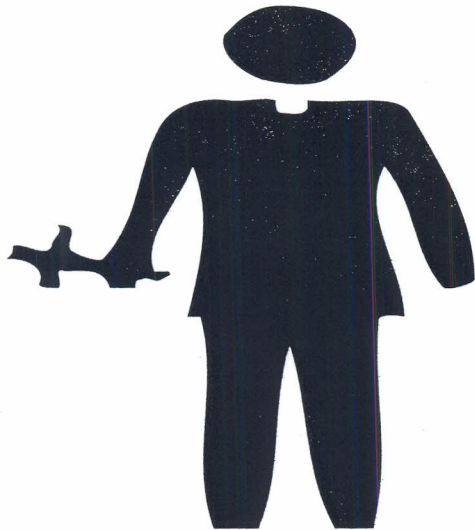
THOMAS G. LONG

By all reports, preaching is once again in trouble. This should not surprise us really. Preaching is always in trouble. Of all the arts of ministry, preaching spends more time in the principal's office than any of the others. You name the charge, and someone has filed it against sermons. Preaching is too boring or too emotional, too fuzzy or too linear, too unbiblical or too biblicist, too authoritarian or too weak. People do not agree about the nature of the problem, but almost everybody agrees that something about preaching has gone seriously awry yet again.

Most homileticians, and I would number myself among them, are convinced that many of preaching's perennial problems, however we may want to identify them, are due to the fact that preachers must aim at a moving target. We do not preach to static, universal humanoids but to real people who float, swim, and splash around in the prevailing culture.

So, no sooner have we emerged from our studies and spread out our sermon notes on the pulpit, than we look up to find that the congregation is not exactly the one we had in mind when we crafted the sermon. While we were back there exegeting the text, someone invented movable type, motion pictures, television, or the Internet, and this reshaped people's minds to the point that they don't process information the same old way.

Or perhaps somewhere along the way, our hearers developed biblical amnesia, and they cannot follow our scriptural allusions because they don't know the difference between Jeremiah and a geranium. Or maybe someone waved a wand over the culture, and everybody decided all at once that they were tired of being churchy religious and now wanted to be mystical "spiritual seekers." These changes always seem to catch us off guard, and it takes a while for the pulpit to decide what combination of adjustment and resistance keeps faith with the gospel.



The point is, a good sermon bears the marks not only of its origins—a biblical text—but also of its destination: a particular congregation situated in time and place. Thus, despite our desire to speak of the unchanging task of gospel preaching, the fact is that preaching is always recalibrating itself to current conditions. Forming the message for the context is a matter of trial and error, and some measure of communicational "trouble" is impossible to avoid. The sermon vehicle inevitably lurches when preachers don't shift the gears, and the gears grind noisily when we do.

AUGUSTINE'S THREE-LEGGED STOOL: TEACHING, DELIGHTING, PERSUADING

In my own work in homiletics, I have been helped by Augustine's description of the purpose of a sermon: to teach, to delight, and to persuade. Augustine borrowed this three-fold description from Cicero, but he replanted it in the soil of biblical rhetoric and, therefore, refashioned the description into a peculiarly Christian one. For Augustine, teaching, delighting, and persuading are complex and nuanced terms, but I have tried to capture their essence by imagining what Augustine would like to hear "at the door" after a sermon. It would be something like, "I learned something in your sermon (teach); I was moved by what you said (delight); and I intend to do something about it (persuade)."

I have also argued that, over the past 50 years, preachers and homileticians have been so consumed with matters of "delight" (such as narrative, inductive movement, and images), that congregations have been quietly forgetting the content of the faith. The current trouble with preaching, then, is that the prior task of teaching has been neglected, and consequently, congregations have been stimulated but not instructed, moved but not persuaded, and have suffered a diminished capacity to speak and act as Christians.

In his fine essay, David Fler quite rightly notes that my description of preaching's current woes is most applicable to the mainline churches. The mainline preachers may have neglected the teaching task over the past decades, but when Augustine is applied to Fler's own, more didactically oriented tradition in the Churches of Christ, a different diagnosis results. The Restoration tradition has, Fler shows, done plenty of teaching. In terms of Augustine's tripod stool, perhaps it is the missing leg of rhetorical delight that causes the sermon to collapse.

WHAT'S THE NEWS?

While tipping my cap to Fler's deft analysis, it does seem to me that, at one level, much preaching today, whether it be evangelical, mainline, or liberal, shares a common distress. We can see the trouble when we peer beneath Augustine's categories of teaching, delighting, and persuading, where there lies an even more basic understanding of preaching, namely preaching as "good news."

The first Christian sermon, it could be said, was the startled cry of Easter morning: "The tomb is empty! He is risen!" All subsequent Christian proclamation grows out of this announcement. It clearly constitutes news, that is to say, something has happened that constitutes a break in the expected pattern, and, for those who comprehend its depths, this news is indeed good.

The urgent problem of preaching today is that it does not strike those who hear it as news. Sermons can be full of sound teaching but finally be ingrown because their teaching only confirms what we already know. Sermons can be poetically delightful but can finally be sentimental because they stir up only predictable affections. Sermons can be ethically persuasive but only toward those actions we are already inclined to perform anyway.

When the Easter word rolled out of the cemetery, it was news that changed everything. Something had happened that could not have been predicted out of the possibilities at hand. The emotion stirred was not nostalgia but astonishment. The persuasion it produced was not rededication to the task at hand but a mission forged in an unexpected world.

However, if all gospel preaching is news, then Augustine's categories help us see what is necessary for this news to sink in, for this news to be news. The announcement, "He is risen!" implies the question "Who is risen?" And in order to say who is risen and what it means that he is risen necessarily involves much teaching.

The word, "He is risen!" is news that claps like thunder, and its telling calls for the delightful language of passion and urgency. The news, "He is risen!" is not news like the report of a partly cloudy day; it is the news of a violent storm that will shake the foundations of the world and dramatically reshape the landscape. Preparations must be made; actions must be taken. The world is now different because of this news.

In my mainline world, the good news is often missed or ignored because the basic knowledge is not in place for hearers to recognize the gospel as news. When we are taught again who we have crucified, then "He is risen!" will rouse us once again.

In Fleer's world, though, where teaching and knowledge have always been in ample supply, the good news can strike the ear like old news, news we already know. When nothing new is happening, we relax and settle into old structures, content in the conviction that the world is the same today as it was yesterday.

When preachers burst into the church with Easter astonishment on their faces and language shaped by the improbable experience of the empty tomb, perhaps instead of "huh?" or "yeah we know that already" they will hear a passionate, "He is risen indeed!"

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